

JUDITH^{OF} BETHULIA

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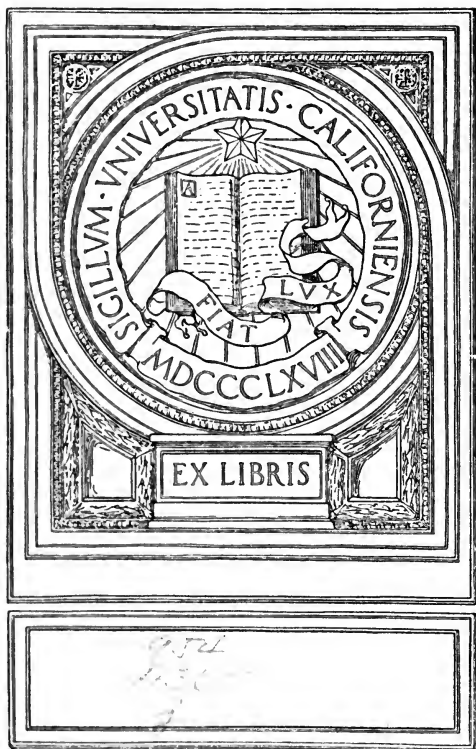
THOMAS · BAILEY · ALDRICH

John Craig

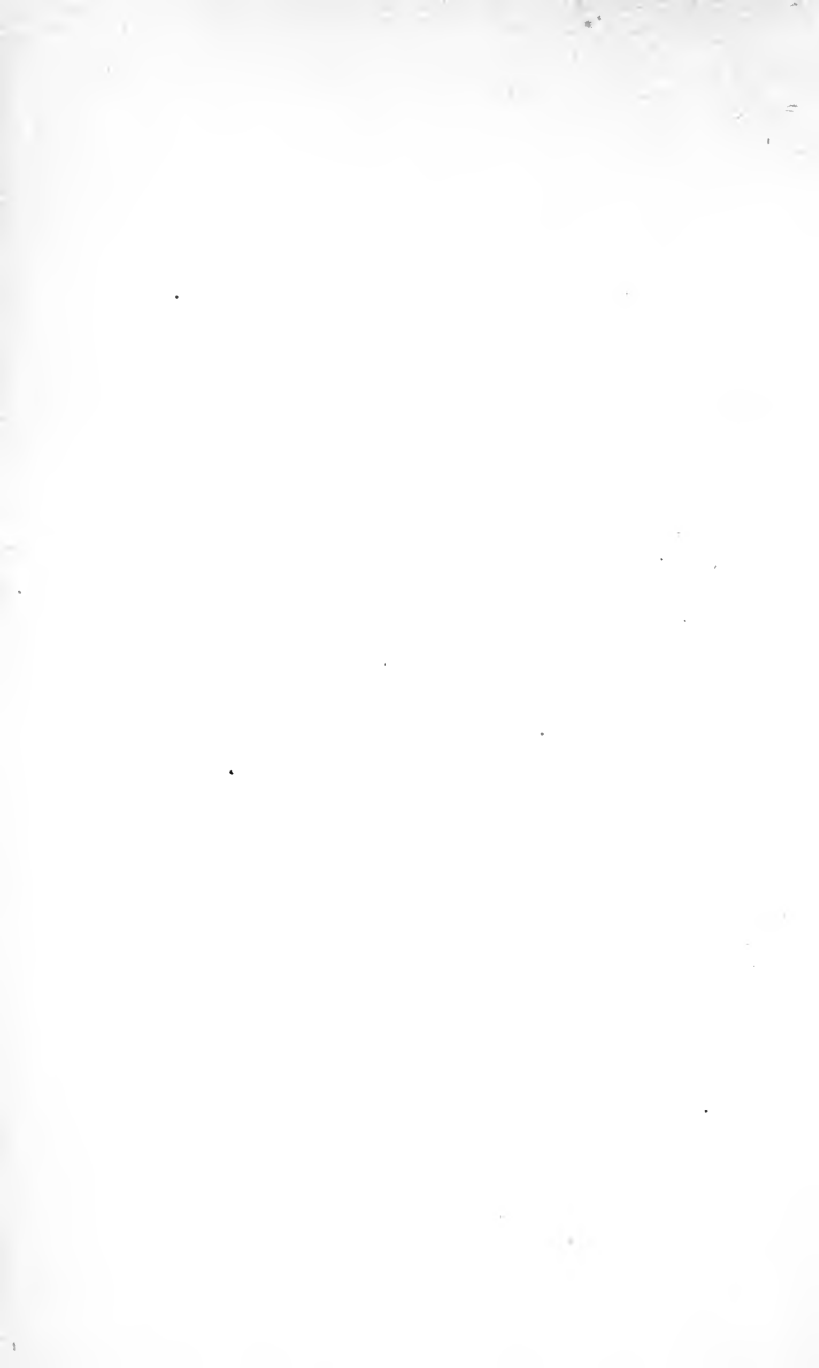


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John Craig Esq.
With the sincere regards
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JUDITH OF BETHULÎA



Miss M. J. M. in her costume in "The Girl of the Year"

JUDITH OF BETHULÎA

A TRAGEDY

BY

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY

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1905

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SECOND EDITION.

TO THE
ALABAMA

THIS play — written for Miss Nance O'Neil and produced at the Tremont Theatre, Boston, October 13, 1904 — is in part a dramatization of the author's narrative poem "Judith and Holofernes." Though it contains lines and passages from the story, the drama is essentially a distinct work, dealing with characters, incidents, and situations not to be found in the poem or in the apocryphal episode upon which both pieces were based.

November, 1904.

NOTE TO SECOND EDITION

THE changes made in the two scenes constituting Act III are in consonance with the author's original design which the date set for the stage production of the play prevented him from elaborating.

May, 1905.

CHARACTERS

HOLOFERNES, *Chief-captain of the Assyrians*

ACHIOR, *The Ammonite, lately fled from Holofernes
and in love with Judith*

BAGOAS, *Captive and slave to Holofernes*

OZIAS, }
CHARMIS, } *Patriarchs of the beleaguered town*
CHABRIS, }

JOACHIM, }
NATHAN, } *Two Scholars*

ABNER, }
HADAD, } *Captains of the Watch*

ELIKA, }
LAMECH, } *Spearmen*

FIRST CAPTAIN }
SECOND CAPTAIN }
THIRD CAPTAIN } *of Holofernes' Army*
FOURTH CAPTAIN }
FIFTH CAPTAIN }
AN ARCHER }

JUDITH, *A rich widow of Bethulia*

MARAH, *Handmaid and companion to Judith*

NAOMI, *A woman of the people*

*Dancing-girls, musicians, Assyrian lords,
and soldiers of both armies.*

ACT I



JUDITH OF BETHULÎA

ACT I

SCENE I. A street in Bethulîa. Time : close upon day-break. It is still very dark. Enter Ozias, Charmis, and Chabris with Abner and Hadad, captains of the guard, preceded by several night-watchmen carrying lighted lanterns slung on long staffs. The light-bearers, on halting, form in a half circle behind the speakers.

OZIAS

HERE let us pause a moment and take breath.

(To Abner)

What is the hour ?

ABNER

'T is close upon the dawn.

CHARMIS

At dawn it was we were to hear their prayer.

OZIAS

Their orders, rather. We no longer rule.

CHABRIS

Hunger and thirst and fever rule us now.
The people threaten to break down the gates
Unless within the limit of five days
We somehow get them bread and meat and
drink,
Or come to terms with the Assyrians.

CHARMIS

That means surrender.

CHABRIS

And surrender means —

OZIAS

Slaughter, since Holofernes seldom spares
Woman or child. Scant mercy will he show
To us who for a month have blocked his march
Through the hill-passes.

CHARMIS

Can the town be held
Much longer?

OZIAS

No. Starvation faces us,
Draws each day nearer. We have still some grain,

And just outside the Eastern Gate a spring
The foe have not discovered.

HADAD

Pardon, lord.

This night they crept up to the outer wall
And dammed the water-course.

OZIAS, *angrily*

Where were our guards,
To let that happen?

HADAD

Thrice their number came
And fell upon them in the dead of night.
The bodies of our comrades choke the stream.

CHABRIS

Each moment brings some new calamity!

CHARMIS

Aye; it is whispered that the pest is here.
At set of sun two women and a child
Were taken with strange sickness on the street.

CHABRIS

Perchance they drank of some infected well.

CHARMIS

Enoch the leech, most wise in that disease,
Named it the plague.

OZIAS

Alas, that this should be !

(To Hadad)

What other stroke has fortune dealt to us
By stealth ?

HADAD

Nought else. The foe have made no move
Save that I told thee of.

OZIAS

Unwatchful eyes,
Methinks, are those we trust to guard our sleep !

ABNER

Few are the eyes that have not watched this night.
Even the widow Judith hath stood guard,
Since dusk, upon the Tower.

CHARMIS

What brings her there ?

ABNER

I know not. Achior the Ammonite,
Who has not quit the courtyard since she came,

Told me, in passing, that late yestere'en
He saw her hasten through the court and climb
The mouldy stairway, at whose foot he waits
To shield her from mischance when she descends.
Rude folk, and wanton, wander in the dark.

CHABRIS

Strange she should spend the night upon the Tower !

OZIAS

Doubtless she sought the quiet of the place
There in the starlight to commune with God.
Standing in silence on some lofty height
I have myself felt nearer unto Him.
A holy woman, dead Manasseh's wife.
Her feet are swift to mercy. Through the siege
Her touch has soothed the dying, and her voice
In the dull ear of sorrow whispered hope.
An angel of sweet mercy has she been !

CHARMIS

Yet till we fell upon this evil time
She held herself aloof in her own house,
Leading a life of penances and prayers.
If she went forth, 't was with a widow's veil

That muffled up her beauty from the gaze.
Comely and fair is she to look upon !

OZIAS

Her beauty goes unhidden. She is seen
In every dingy by-way of the town
Where grief or pain has builded its abode.
No hovel is so loathsome but the earth
Before the door-sill bears her sandal-print.

ABNER

A saint among the poor ! The common folk
Look on her as a kind of prophetess,
Like Deborah.

CHABRIS

I would that she might find
Another Jael ! But such women now
Walk not the earth.

OZIAS

Who knows ? In every age
Have mighty spirits dwelt unseen with man,
Biding the hour that needed them.

[The stage lightens a little]

CHARMIS

Behold,
The dawn creeps on apace. 'T is well we stir.

What answer shall we give the desperate folk
Who bid us meet them in the council-hall
With some device to ease their misery?
What can we do that has been left undone?

CHABRIS

Such food as is, the fighting man must have,
Though wife and children starve — an old, old tale!

OZIAS

To yield the city is to seal our doom
At once. The people grant us five days' grace.
In this brief respite what may chance, God knows.

CHABRIS

Then at the end we open wide our gates
To Holofernes and his hungry swords!

OZIAS, *lifting up his hands*

Unless God help us.

(Turns to Abner)

We can find our way
Without the lanterns. Get thee now to bed,
Thou and thy men, who long have been a-foot.
The peace of God rest on thee and thy house!

The two officers salute the Patriarchs and go out, followed by the light-bearers extinguishing their lanterns.

Our path leads by the Tower ; I fain would speak
With Judith, if she be not gone from there.

That woman's name, pronounced just now by
chance,

Sent a quick thrill of lightness to my heart,
An exultation, wherefore I know not,
And something whispered me : " Go talk with her ! "

CHARMIS

She must have gone by this.

OZIAS

'Tis but a step,
And we shall know. Meanwhile the certainty
That she awaits us yonder in the court
Hath such possession of me I can see
The woman standing there, beneath the arch,
With parted lips as if to speak to us !

CHABRIS

Go first, Ozias ; we will follow thee.

Dark stage and change of scene

SCENE II. Early dawn. A spacious courtyard closed in at the rear by the city-wall. Antiquated architecture. Groups of squalid figures of men, women, and children dimly seen lying asleep here and there in the background. A dilapidated archway spans the left-hand upper entrance. A short flight of stone steps on the right leads to the door of a round tower forming part of the fortifications. Achior, in helmet and breastplate, is discovered standing near the foot of the steps in an attitude of expectancy. Presently he paces to and fro, glancing from time to time up at the tower with an anxious expression. A distant peal of trumpets is heard. The purple gradually lightens behind the battlements. As the scene progresses, citizens of wretched aspect cross the back of the stage, and at intervals a wounded soldier is borne by on a litter. The effect to be produced is that of a crowded town in a state of siege.

ACHIOR, *halting in front of the tower*

All this long night upon the battlements
Has Judith kept her vigil, and I here,
Low at her feet, where I would ever be —
Merari's daughter, dead Manasseh's wife,

Who, since the barley harvest when he died,
Has dwelt three years a widow in her house
And looked on no man : where Manasseh sleeps
In his strait sepulchre, there sleeps her heart.
She will not give me pleasure of her eyes
Nor any word of comfort. (*Pauses*) There she
stands,

Fairer than morning in Arabia,
Her beauty blending with the light of dawn
On yonder tower. Now she turns, and now,
Like one that wanders in a dream, descends.
At last !

Achior withdraws a little. Judith appears in the doorway of the tower

JUDITH, *descending the steps*

The Lord be with thee, Achior, all thy days !
May peace and grace walk ever at thy side.

ACHIOR

Daughter of heaven, would He but grant thy
prayer,

I should not be the lonely man I am.
May I a word with thee ?

JUDITH, *brushing past him*

Indeed not now.

Nay, stop me not, for I have haste to speak
Of weighty matters with the Patriarchs,
Who come this way — as if God sent them to me !

ACHIOR, *aside, impatiently*

So ends my waiting ! Never have I chance
To be alone with her but some ill thing
Steps in between us ! — Then some other hour,
Fair Judith ?

JUDITH, *preoccupied*

Yes, some other hour than this.

Enter Ozias, Chabris, and Charmis.

CHARMIS, *aside to Chabris*

Lo ! she is here. 'T is as Ozias said.
She seems like one foreknowing we would come.

Judith approaches the Patriarchs with her hands
crossed upon her bosom, and makes low obeisance.
Achior retires up the stage, and during the ensu-
ing dialogue watches the speakers with deep interest.

OZIAS, *pausing and gazing intently at Judith*

I marvel much that in this stricken town

Is one face left not pinched with fear, nor wan
With grief's acquaintance. Such is Judith's face.

CHARMIS

That woman walketh in the light of God.

JUDITH

Would it were so ! If so, I know it not ;
Yet this I know, that where faith is, is light.
Oh, is it true, Ozias, thou hast mind
To yield the city to the infidels
After five days, unless the Lord shall stoop
From heaven to help us ?

OZIAS, *with a despairing gesture*

It is even so.

The enemy have failed to batter down
Our gates of bronze, or decent entrance make
With beam or catapult in these tough walls,
Or with their lighted arrows fire the roofs.
Thus far our strength has baffled them ; but lo !
The wells run dry, the store of barley shrinks.
Our young men faint upon the battlements,
Our wives and children by the empty tanks
Lie down and perish.

JUDITH

If we doubt, we die.

But whoso trusts in God, as Isaac did,
Though suffering greatly even to the end,
Dwells in a citadel upon a rock :
Wave shall not reach it, nor fire topple down.

OZIAS

Our young men die upon the battlements,
And day by day beside the dusty wells
Our wives and children.

JUDITH

They shall go and drink
At living streams, through heavenly pastures walk
With Saints and Prophets in eternal life !
Is there no God ?

OZIAS

One only, one true God.

But now His face is turned aside from us,
He sees not Israel.

JUDITH

Is His mercy less
Than that of Holofernes ? Shall we trust
In this fierce Bull of Asshur ?

CHABRIS, *with an air of ending the discussion*

All is said !

The foe has hemmed us in on every side,
The plague is come, and famine walks the streets.
For five days more we place our trust in God.

JUDITH, *turning upon him sharply*

Ah, His time is not man's time, learnèd scribe !
And who are we — the dust beneath His feet —
To name the hour of our deliverance,
Saying to Him : *Thus shalt Thou do, and so !*
Ozias, thou to whom the heart of man
Is as a scroll illegible, dost thou
Pretend to read the mystery of God ?

CHARMIS

The woman sayeth wisely. We are wrong
That in our anguish broke the staff of faith
Whereon we leaned till now. These aged eyes
Have lost their use if I see not in her
A God's white Angel bearing messages.

OZIAS

She seems like one inspired — mark her brow,
The radiance of it ! Thus some Sibyl looks,

In trance, delivering her oracles.

When such lips speak, 't is to the souls of men.

Speak thou, we hear. What is it thou wouldst have?

JUDITH

I cannot answer thee, nor make it plain

In mine own thought. This night I had a dream

Not born of sleep, for both my eyes were wide,

My sense alive — a vision, if thou wilt,

Of which the scattered fragments in my mind

Are as the fragments of a crystal vase

That, slipping from a slave-girl's careless hand,

Falls on the marble. No most cunning skill

Shall join the pieces and make whole the vase.

So with my vision. I seem still to hear

Weird voices round me, inarticulate,

Words shaped and uttered by invisible lips.

At whiles there seems a palm prest close to mine

That fain would lead me somewhere. I know not

What all portends. Some great event is near.

Last night celestial spirits were on wing

Over the city. As I sat alone

Within the tower, alone yet not alone,

A strangest silence fell upon the land ;
Like to a sea-mist stretching east and west
It spread, and close on this there came a sound
Of snow-soft plumage rustling in the dark,
And voices that such magic whisperings made
As the sea makes at twilight on a strip
Of sand and pebble. Suddenly I saw —
Look, look, Ozias ! Charmis, Chabris, look !
See ye not, yonder, a white mailed hand
That with its levelled finger points through air ?

OZIAS

Nought but the vacant air do I behold.

JUDITH

There, look thou there ! What blindness veils thine
eyes ?

See, it still lingers, like a silver mist !
It changes, fades, and then comes back again,
And now 't is ruby-red — as red as blood !

Judith shades her eyes with one palm as if the brightness dazzled. The Patriarchs, stricken with awe by Judith's words and manner, follow the direction of her

gaze, but evidently see nothing. They look at one another wonderingly. Then Judith, after a pause :

'Tis gone ! Fear not ; it was a sign to me,
To me alone. Ozias, didst thou note
The way it pointed ? — to the Eastern Gate !
Send the guard orders not to stay me there.
Oh, question not ! The omen I obey.
I must go hence. Before the shadow slants
Upon the courtyard thrice I shall return,
Else shall men's eyes not look upon me more.
What darkness lies between this hour and that
Tongue may not say. The thing I can, I will,
Leaning on God, remembering what befell
Jacob in Syria when he fed the flocks
Of Laban, and how Isaac in his day,
And Abraham, were chastened by the Lord.

OZIAS

This passes understanding. We would more
Of thy design, for thou art dear to us.

JUDITH

Wait thou in patience. Till I come, keep thou
The sanctuaries. Swear to keep them — swear !

The Patriarchs draw a little apart and appear to consult together for a moment.

OZIAS, *stepping from the group*

Although thy speech is fraught with mystery,
There lives conviction in it, and we swear
To hold the town, and if we hold it not,
Then shalt thou find us in the synagogue
Dead near the Sacred Ark; the spearmen dead
At the four gates; upon the parapets
The archers bleaching.

JUDITH

Be it so, my lords —

Yet be it not so ! Shield me with thy prayers !

Judith bows down before the Patriarchs ; they lift their hands in benediction above her head, and then slowly move away.

ACHIOR, *advancing swiftly down the stage*

Daughter of heaven ! what mad thing is this ?
Of thy dark commerce with these aged men
Something I caught, but nothing definite.
To some most perilous action on thy part
They seemingly consented. Tell me all !

JUDITH

Time and the place prevent me ; and in truth,
Whereof we spoke concerns thee not to know.
Such scanty knowledge as thou hast of it
Keep locked within thy memory for a while.

ACHIOR

Thou hast some wild and dangerous intent
That chills my blood. Can I not counsel thee ?
What evil dream at midnight in the tower
Has stolen thy reason ? Whither wouldst thou go ?

JUDITH, *hesitating a moment*

Didst see that finger pointing to yon camp ?

ACHIOR

I saw it not, nor thou !

JUDITH

Thither I go.

ACHIOR

That thou shalt not !

JUDITH, *haughtily*

Thou sayest ?

ACHIOR, *grasping her wrist*

Thou shalt not !

O Judith, listen ! Rough I am in words
That would be gentle. What thy purpose is
Lies hidden from me. I see only this,
In yonder camp, among those barbarous hordes,
Swift death awaits thee, or some darker fate.

JUDITH

That must I venture. Other will than mine
Ordains the trial. O Achior, free my wrist !
Dear friend, brave soldier ! Naught shall bar my
way.

ACHIOR, *releasing her*

O Judith, let love bar it ! Since the hour,
Now two years gone, when first I looked on thee,
No thought of mine by day or dream by night
Has been without thy image.

JUDITH, *recoiling*

Say it not !

ACHIOR

Can I behold thee go to shameful death,
And speak no word ? My fear has made me bold.
Judith, I love thee. The dull sward that knows
Thy foot's light touch is hallowed ground to me.

I would not have the blossom from a bough
To fall upon thee rudely.

JUDITH, *fiercely, and then with sudden gentleness*

Peace, I say ! —

Dear soul, my heart lies buried in a grave,
I have no love to give thee. Elsewhere seek
Some Jewish maiden worthy of thy worth.
I am thine elder both in time and grief.
No more of this. In kindness, pain me not.

ACHIOR

Then is my life a maimed and worthless thing.
Yet this is left me. If thou still art bent
On thy mysterious errand to yon camp,
I'll go with thee. In other days I served
Prince Holofernes, from whose wrath I fled
To dwell, a wanderer, in alien tents,
And since have set my breast against his spears.
I know him well. 'T would fit his darksome mind
To lay a hand on me. Together, then !

JUDITH

The Patriarchs shall forbid it ! / forbid !
Our path divides here, and so fare-thee-well !

Too long have I been spendthrift of my time.
I must prepare me for the journey hence.

(Abstractedly)

I shall go richly decked, pearls in my hair
And diamonds on my bosom. My handmaid
Shall even drape me in the rustling silk
That in a chest of camphor-wood has lain
Unworn since I was wed — the proud silk robe,
Heavy with vine-work, silvery flower and star,
And looped at either shoulder with a gem
To ransom princes.

(Suddenly conscious of Achior)

What, still art thou here?
Thou hast thy answer. Trouble me no more!

ACHIOR

Thou art gone mad! The grievous sights and
sounds
Of this beleaguered town have turned thy brain
And bred in it some desperate resolve.
Whatever chances, I must follow thee.
I'll to the Patriarchs and get their leave —
With or without it, thine shall be my doom.

JUDITH

Thou hast no part in it. God calls His own,
And I am His and Israel's ! I go
To free my people, and, if needs must be,
Gladly to pay the forfeit with my life.
There lie the pith and sum of my intent.
Stand back and give me passage, Achior !

Judith brushes him aside and makes a swift exit through
the archway at the rear of the stage. Daybreak.

CURTAIN



ACT II



ACT II

SCENE I. The Eastern Gate. A stretch of the ancient city-wall. In the centre of the masonry is a wide gateway before which stand several soldiers. Two spearmen, Lamech and Elikah, with levelled lances are keeping back, right and left, a surging mob of men, women, and children. Here and there is a woman carrying an inverted water-jar. Nathan and two or three other respectably dressed citizens are seen in the throng. Murmurs and gesticulations. Voices in the crowd cry: "Drink! give us drink!" The rabble momentarily increases. Time: forenoon.

LAMECH

FALL back, good folk! Last night the enemy

Poisoned the spring outside the city wall.

It is forbidden to draw water now.

No soul may pass here. Back, poor creatures, back!

VOICES

Drink! give us drink! we die of thirst — of thirst!

AN OLD MAN, *leaning on a staff*

Oh, are we not Thy children who of old,

Trod the Chaldean idols in the dust,
And built our altars only unto Thee?

VOICES

Bread! we are starving. Bread, or we must die!

A WOMAN

Just one poor wheaten loaf since yesterday —
For three of us! In mercy's name, a crust!
My little Ruth is dying!

LAMECH

Woman, peace!

'T is better so. I saw our Rachel die,
Our last born ewe lamb, and I shed no tear,
Knowing that hunger could not grieve her more.
So weep not thou.

ELIKA

My bosom aches for thee,
Beneath this breastplate.

VOICES

Water! water! bread!

NATHAN, *apart*

With fire and sword and famine, evil days
Have fallen upon us! — What is happening?

A perceptible new commotion in the crowd, then a sudden hush as Joachim enters in haste.

JOACHIM, *excitedly*

Two minutes since, as I was pondering
The famished folk that haunt the market-place,
Where one had fallen, smitten with the pest,
A woman swept me by — if 't was indeed
A woman, not an angel — in a blaze
Of gems and snowy raiment. Such a shape
Comes to men's dreams. Along the crowded streets
Thin, pleading hands reached out to touch her hem,
Rude archers doffed their head-gear as she passed,
And all the people stood amazed, as though
'T was some seraphic creature sent of God
To save us in our misery. Behold,
The shining apparition moves this way !
The crowd silently huddle together on one side of the
stage and gaze wonderingly in the direction indicated
by Joachim.

VOICES

A miracle ! a miracle !

NATHAN, *shading his eyes and looking off*

Not so !

And yet a wonder ! — dead Manasseh's wife,
Not in her mournful widow's-weeds, but decked
As for a banquet ! I remember her
In those same bridal garments as she stood
Before the High Priest in the synagogue
One happier day than this ! What may it mean ?
Surely she would not mock us with her state.

JOACHIM

I knew her not in that unwonted guise.

Enter Judith partly veiled, a crowd following. She is richly dressed, with jewels in her hair and at the throat. A mantle falling from one shoulder exposes the splendor of her attire. Close behind follows Marah, the handmaid, carrying an osier basket. A woman holds up a child to Judith, who bends down and caresses it.

JUDITH

My heart bleeds for thee, thou most sorrowful !
From brow and bosom I would tear these jewels
Couldst thou but eat them, or were food to buy.
I give thee silver, though 't is mockery ;
A dozen grains of barley were more worth.
Judith hurriedly hands the woman several pieces of

silver from a pouch. As she falls back into the crowd, a woman clutches Judith by the skirt.

Unloose thy fingers and delay me not !

I go to Holofernes, and perchance

By prayer and supplication I shall win

His princely mercy for this stricken town

And all the wretched folk within its walls.

Nay, loose thy hold, each moment hath its price !

Judith wrests herself from the woman's grasp, arranges the veil over her face, and approaches the two spearmen at the gate, who stop her with their crossed lances held breast-high.

LAMECH

None may pass forth without the captain's seal.

JUDITH, *drawing a parchment from her girdle*

That have I here. Already thou hast word

To speed me and my handmaid. I am she

The parchment tells of.

(Looking closely at one of the spearmen while the other examines the scroll)

Thou — I knew thee once,

Elika, son of Jorim, aforetime

My husband's herdsman — a brave soldier now.

Thy gentle sister and thy mother, friend,
How fares it with them ?

ELIKA

She that clutched thy gown,
That was my mother. Reason fled from her
When Leah died.

JUDITH, *wringing her hands*

And that was Naomi,
And I repulsed her ! Whither has she gone ?

Judith turns passionately to the crowd, which opens and
shows Naomi standing in the background with a
blank expression on her countenance. Judith takes
her tenderly by the hand and leads her forward.

Dost thou not know me ? It was in thine arms
I lay and slept the hour that I was born.
Dear nurse, look on me. It is even I,
“ Judith the wilful ” — thou didst call me so.

NAOMI

Ay, it is Judith, a grown maiden now,
The pearl of maidens. 'Tis thy wedding day,
And my sweet Leah has gone, I know not where —
Somewhere hard by — to gather snow-white flowers
To deck thee.

JUDITH

Oh, she stabs me to the heart
With her unreason !

ELIKA

Ever thus she talks,
Unmindful, wandering from place to place
In search of Leah. She seems to know thee now,
But presently her mind will be a blur.
See how she stares at thee !

NAOMI, *gazing vaguely at Judith*

And who art thou
To stay me in the street here ? Dost thou bring
Tidings of Leah ? Has she told thee all —
How we two lay at midnight parched with thirst,
And would not touch the water in the jar
(Scarcely a gill there was !), but each to each
Smiled, and said : "Drink thou !" Then I fell asleep,
And just at dawn, I being in a drowse,
She brought the jar and set it to my lip,
And I, unwitting, drained the precious drops
That might have saved her ! When the morning
came

She spoke no more, but lay there white and cold.
Was that the tale she told thee? Oh, 't was true !

JUDITH

If this be not a dream, her heart is broken !

NAOMI

Listen — behind the wainscot I have hid
A cup of sweet rain-water. I would die
A thousand deaths ere I would taste of it !
Let her come back to me, my best beloved !

JUDITH

This is too piteous ! Some one take her hence.

(Discovering Nathan in the crowd)

Ah — thou, good Nathan ; lead her to my house
And bid my people there to care for her
Till I — God willing — shall come back again.
Go with him, Naomi. — Such balm as heals
A wounded spirit send Thou to this one !

Judith places the hand of Naomi in that of Nathan, who
leads her away.

LAMECH, *returning the scroll to Judith*

Manasseh's widow — may God guard thee — pass !
Attendant soldiers throw open the heavy gates. Lamech

and Elikah range themselves on either side and salute
Judith impressively as she passes out.

JUDITH, *over her shoulder*

Quick, Marah, follow me !

Dark stage and change of scene

SCENE II. The Camp of Asshur. An open space surrounded by cedar and olive trees. In the distant background are tents arranged in a semicircle under arching boughs. Part way down the stage on the left is a marquee with green hangings covering the entrance. Under a fringed canopy in the middle foreground Holofernes is discovered lying upon a leopard skin, his head propped up on one hand. On each side of him are groups of Assyrian lords and captains. Spearmen and men-of-all-arms observed lounging at the wings. Bagoas stands a little distance from his master. The soldiers in miscellaneous costumes, Holofernes' army being composed of conscripts from a dozen different conquered nations. Time : noon.

HOLOFERNES

O lords and captains, we are put to shame.
How does it happen that a little town,
Stuck like a hornet's nest against a rock,
Checks and defies such mighty hosts as ours?
Till now we swept in triumph through the land.
As the pent whirlwind, breaking from its leash,

Seizes upon the yellow desert sands
And hurls them in dark masses right and left,
So have we scattered the great armies sent
To stop our progress. All the nations saw
Our might, and cowered. One by one they came
And swore allegiance, grovelling at our feet —
The sons of Esau and the Moabites,
The tribes that dwelt beside the salt-sea dunes,
And those that builded on the mountain-tops.
All, save these dogs of Hebrews, bent the knee.

(An archer enters suddenly)

What would that man? His coming vexes me.

THE ARCHER, *kneeling*

O lord and prince, that should know all, know this :
An hour ago a watchman on the height
That overlooks the city saw two shapes
From out the eastern gateway issue forth —
In quest of water, it was thought at first.
But no, they paused not at the ruined well
Piled up three-deep with those we slew last night.
Straight on they pressed, and plunged into the wood
That hides a hundred footpaths through the hills,

And there, as if by magic, disappeared.
Swift runners were despatched to seek these two,
But all in vain:

HOLOFERNES

Begone! It matters not.

I would two thousand issued from that gate
And gave us chance to feed them with our swords.
Fool of the gods, to fetch me such a tale!

[The Archer salaams and goes out crestfallen]

Let no one else break in on our discourse.
Give me your wisdom, ye who lead my hosts.
For a moon's length have we been held at bay
By a mere handful in a crumbling town
That blocks our passage through the narrow pass.
This is the key unlocks a world beyond.
Jerusalem should have fallen long ago
And all the riches of Judea been ours.
Some spell more potent than the Hebrew spears
Must work behind them. Speak; what shall be
done?

(Waves his hand toward one of the lords)

Say on, brave Captain of the Elymeans.
What voice is thine?

1ST CAPTAIN

My voice is for assault.

Better lie dead, each man upon his shield,
Than waste here with no grass to feed the mares
And scant meat left. Rust gathers on our swords.

HOLOFERNES, *turning to another chief*

And thou?

2D CAPTAIN

My lord, a soberer counsel mine.

Wide is the moat and many are the spears,
And stout the gates. Have we not flung our men
Against the well-set edges of their swords?
Note how the ravens wheel in hungry files
Above the trenches; watch them as they rise
Red-beaked and surfeited. Has it availed?
The city still defies us; but within
There's that shall gnaw its heart out, if we wait;
For white-cheeked famine and red-spotted pest
Are our allies.

3D CAPTAIN

A judgment! Let us wait.

4TH CAPTAIN, *turning fiercely on the last two speakers*

Ye should have tarried on the river's bank

At home, and decked your hair with butterflies
Like the King's harlots. Little use are ye !

5TH CAPTAIN

Nay, valiant Dara, they did well to come ;
They have their uses. When our meat is gone
We'll even feed upon the tender flesh
Of these tame girls, who, though they dress in steel,
Like more the tinkle of a dulcimer
Than the sharp whisper of an arrowhead.

Tumult and angry mutterings among the captains ;
several of them lay hand on their sword-hilts, and
threaten one another. The bowmen and spearmen
at the wings make ready with their weapons. Holo-
fernes springs to his feet and glares menacingly at
the chiefs.

HOLOFERNES

Hold !— Keep thy falchions for the enemy.
Who draws a blade shall sheathe it in his breast !—
The conclave ends. Later I speak my will.

Judith, followed by Marah, enters from the rear of the
stage, halts in terror halfway down, and then swiftly
advances, looking about her to ascertain whom she
shall address. Murmurs of surprise and admiration
are heard on every side. Marah remains in the back-
ground, holding the osier basket in her arms.

HOLOFERNES, *starting*

Who breaks upon our councils? Silence, all!

Whence comest thou — thy mission and thy name?

JUDITH

Judith of Bethulia I am called.

HOLOFERNES, *partly aside*

Methought the phantom of some murdered queen

Had risen from the ground beneath my feet! —

If these Samaritan women are thus shaped,

O my brave captains, let not one be slain!

What seekest thou within the hostile tents

Of Asshur?

JUDITH

Holofernes.

HOLOFERNES

This is he.

JUDITH, *throwing herself at his feet*

Most mighty prince and master, if indeed

Thou art that Holofernes whom I seek,

And dread, in truth, to find, see at thy feet

A hapless woman who in fear has flown

From a doomed people.

HOLOFERNES

If thy words are true,
Thou shalt have shelter of our tents, and food,
And meet observance, though our enemy.
Touching thy people, they with tears of blood,
And ashes on their heads, shall rue the hour
They paid not tribute to our sovereign lord,
The King at Nineveh. But thou shalt live.

JUDITH, *rising*

O gracious prince, I do beseech thee now
Let those that listen stand awhile aloof,
For I have that for thine especial ear
Of import to thee.

At a gesture from Holofernes the captains and men-at-arms retire, making different exits. Bagoas lingers. Judith with a quick look calls the attention of Holofernes to the circumstance. He motions to Bagoas to withdraw.

My lord, if yet thou holdest in thy thought
The words which Achior the Ammonite
Once spoke to thee concerning Israel,
Oh, treasure them, for in them was no guile.

True is it, master, that our people kneel
To an unseen but not an unknown God,
And while we worship Him we cannot fall,
Our tabernacles shall be unprofaned,
Our spears invincible ; but if we sin,
If we transgress the law by which we live,
Our sanctuaries shall be desecrate,
Our tribes thrust forth into the wilderness,
Scourged and accursed. Therefore, O my lord,
Seeing my nation wander from the faith
Taught of the Prophets, I have fled dismayed.

HOLOFERNES, *partly to himself*

In this wise, I remember, Achior spoke,
And warned me not to meddle with the Jews.
I banished him, and straight he refuge sought
Among the Israelites, who gave him place
And honor in their councils. Now his sword
Is turned against us. Hebrew, weigh thy words !

JUDITH

Heed, Holofernes, what I speak this day,
And if the thing I tell thee prove not so,
Let not thy falchion tarry in its sheath,

But seek my heart. Why should thy handmaid
live,

Having deceived thee, flower and crown of men !

HOLOFERNES, *aside*

This woman's voice falls sweeter on my ear
Than the soft laughter of the Assyrian girls
In the bazaars, or when in the cool night,
After the sultry heat of the long day,
They sit beside the fountain with their lutes.

JUDITH

Oh, listen, Holofernes, my sweet lord,
And thou shalt rule not only Bethulïa,
Rich with its hundred altars' crusted gold,
But Cadés-Barné and Jerusalem,
And all the vast hill-land to the blue sea.
I bring to thee the keys of Israel.

HOLOFERNES

Speak, for I needs must hearken to thy words.

JUDITH

Know then, O prince, it is our yearly use
To lay aside the first fruits of the grain,
And so much oil, so many skins of wine,

Which, being sanctified, are held intact
For the High Priests who serve before the Lord
In the great temple at Jerusalem.
This holy food — which even to touch is death —
The people would lay hands on, being starved ;
And they have sent a runner to the Priests
(The Jew Abijah, who, at dead of night,
Sped like a javelin between thy guards),
Begging permit to eat the sacred corn.
'T will not be granted them, as time will prove,
Yet will they eat it. Then shalt thou behold
The archers tumbling headlong from the walls,
Their strength gone from them ; thou shalt see the
 spears
Splitting like reeds within the spearmen's hands,
And the strong captains tottering like old men
Stricken with palsy. Then, O mighty prince,
Then with thy trumpets blaring doleful dooms,
And thy proud banners waving in the wind,
With squares of men and eager clouds of horse
Thou shalt sweep down on them, and strike them
 dead !

HOLOFERNES

The picture, sorceress, lives before my eyes !

JUDITH

But now, my lord, ere this shall come to pass
Five days must wane, for they touch not the food
Until the Jew Abijah shall return
With the Priests' message. Here beneath thy tents,
O Holofernes, would I dwell the while,
Asking but this, that I and my handmaid
Each night, at the sixth hour, may egress have
Into the valley, undisturbed to pray.
I would not be thy prisoner, but thy guest.

HOLOFERNES

Thou shalt be free to come and go, and none
Shall stay thee, nor molest thee, these five days.
And if, O rose of women, the event
Prove not a dwarf beside the prophecy,
Then has the sun not looked upon thy like.
Thy name shall be as honey on men's lips ;
Thou shalt have chests of costly sandal-wood,
And robes in texture like the ring-dove's neck,
And milk-white mares, and chariots, and slaves ;

And thou shalt dwell with me in Nineveh,
In Nineveh, the City of the Gods !

JUDITH, *making a half imperceptible clutch at her bosom*
Oh, who am I that should gainsay my lord ?

HOLOFERNES

Bagoas shall wait on thee ; command the slave.
Bid him fetch fruit and meat for thy repast.

JUDITH

It is not lawful we should eat of them.
My maid has brought a pouch of parchèd corn,
And bread and figs and wine of our own land,
Which shall not fail us.

HOLOFERNES

Even as thou wilt,
O fair Samaritan ! My slave shall come
To do thy bidding.

[Holofernes goes out]

JUDITH

O Marah, is it night, and do I dream ?
Is this the dread Assyrian rumor paints,
He who upon the plains of Ragau smote
The hosts of King Arphaxad, and despoiled

Sidon and Tyrus, and left none unslain?
Gentle he seems we thought so terrible,
Whose name we stilled unruly children with
At bedtime — *See! the Bull of Asshur comes!*
And all the little ones would straight to bed.

MARAH, *slowly*

Mistress, he looks not what we pictured him.

JUDITH

Is he not statured as should be a king?
Beside our tallest captain this grave prince
Towers like the palm above the olive tree.
A gentle prince, with gracious words and ways.
How sayest thou?

MARAH

A gentle prince he is —
To look on. I misdoubt his ways and words.

JUDITH

And I, O Marah, I would trust him not!
Beneath his smoothness all is cruelty.
A tiger's talons thus are shod with down.

(Enter Bagoas; Judith perceives him, and says quickly)

Marah, he waits to show thee to the tent.

(*Aside*) The prince's slave — his shadow, so it seems.

I would not have the ill-will of this man.

Bagoas relieves Marah of the basket and enters the green pavilion with her. He immediately reappears, crossing the stage behind Judith. She observes him attentively.

Thy lord, Bagoas, is a powerful prince.

BAGOAS, *coming forward*

Men fear him greatly.

JUDITH

And thou fearest him?

BAGOAS

I serve him, lady, since I am his slave.

JUDITH

Now thou art mine, I buy thee of thyself

With coin of kindness — rarer 't is than gold.

Thy speech and manner seem beyond thy state.

BAGOAS

In my own land I was less humbly placed.

A merchant was I, but a scholar's son,

And had some strain of learning in my blood.

I travelled in far lands with merchandise,

Lord of rich caravans. Then came a war.
From Koordistán he brought me with his spoils,
This conqueror of cities, slayer of men.
I pine in my captivity, and dream
Of where the swift Nerbudda laves its banks
And one sad woman waits for me in vain.
The gold he throws me in his lavish moods
I hoard to pay my ransom.

JUDITH, *taking a ring from her finger*

Is it so ?

Here's that shall aid thee ; add it to thy store.

BAGOAS

My prayers shall go with thee both day and night.

[He presses the ring to his lips as he goes out

JUDITH

At least he will not be an enemy.

(Muses)

'T was not so evil as I feared, and yet
My heart is cold with terror. What step next ?
The end appalls me. A black precipice
Yawns at my feet whichever way I turn.
I am like one that a magician's wand

Hath laid a spell upon ; I neither speak
Nor move but as some unseen power directs.
I seem to wander in a land of dream
And walk with spectres. As a skein of flax,
Dropt by a weaver working at his loom,
Lies in a tangle, and but snarls the more,
And slips the fingers searching for the clue,
So all my plan lies tangled in my brain.
How stands the matter? I have gained five days
In which to act, and in the interval
May come and go unchallenged by the guard.
Thus far God lights me. All the rest is dark.

Achior abruptly appears at the remote rear of the stage—same entrance as Judith. He halts irresolutely, glancing back over his shoulder, as if he were pursued. Judith turns and discovers him. She rushes to Achior and seizes him by the arm.

Fly from this place, O Achior, here is death !

ACHIOR

I would not were it possible. Unseen
I reached the inner lines, but there I fell.
Upon two Tartar sentinels asleep ;

I broke their slumber and they gave alarm.

I think they follow closely on my heels.

JUDITH

What brings thee to the tents of Asshur?

ACHIOR

Thou !

It was my hope to be thy sword and shield.

JUDITH

I was not in thy keeping, reckless man !

Thy rashness will be like to ruin me.

ACHIOR

Deny me when they question. I will swear

I never knew or saw thee till this hour.

Torture shall wring no other word from me.

JUDITH

Too late. This very hour I spoke of thee

To Holofernes.

ACHIOR

* Say, then, I am one

Thy scorn has withered, that my wits are gone,

And that I vex thee with my vain pursuit ;

Then bid him end me.

JUDITH

Thou indeed art mad.

Less wise than daring, see how thou hast rushed
Headlong on failure !

Sounds of voices and clanking arms off the stage.
Several Tartar soldiers rush in and secure Achior.
Holofernes enters from the opposite side attended by
Bagoas bearing flowers and palm leaves in his arms.
Holofernes on seeing Achior starts back in surprise,
and then advances with a cynical smile on his lips.

HOLOFERNES

Who thus honors us ?

Unless my vision tricks me, it is he,
My valorous Captain of the Ammonites,
My poet-soldier, breaker of maids' hearts,
Harp-player — that shall play upon a rack !

JUDITH, *aside*

There spoke the Holofernes of my thought.

Holofernes remains silent a few seconds, glancing from
Judith to Achior alternately, and finally lets his gaze
rest upon Judith.

HOLOFERNES, *suspiciously*

Thou know'st this man ?

JUDITH, *indifferently*

By sight, but more by name.

A stranger's face is his among the Jews.

I've seen him on the streets in Bethulſa.

How came he here?

HOLOFERNES

Perhaps he followed thee.

JUDITH, *playing with her necklace*

I want him not.

HOLOFERNES

Nor I! This Ammonite

Has little earthly value, it appears —

A kind of carrion that finds no bids

Among the buyers in the market-place.

How then dispose of him? Thou dost not beg

His life of me?

JUDITH

Why should I, lord of all?

I would not beg of thee my own poor life

Were that at issue.

HOLOFERNES

'T were an empty plea

Hadst thou the cause to make it!

JUDITH, *to herself*

We are lost!

HOLOFERNES

Though thou wert folded in my very heart.

I'd tear thee out, didst thou play false with me!
I'll think on it. Meanwhile what shall be done?

JUDITH

Do what thou wilt, O sovereign lord.

HOLOFERNES

Well said!

Thou hast a cunning fashion in thy speech.

(To the guard)

Take him away, and as thou lovest light,
See he escape not.

(To Achior with a mock air of deference)

In some leisure hour

I'll crave thy company. — Out of my sight!

(To Judith tenderly)

Lady, I bring thee flowers!

The soldiers prepare to drag Achior off, one of them unclasping a belt with which to bind him. Judith stands rigid and cold in the centre of the stage. As Holofernes offers the flowers to her, he looks over his shoulder suspiciously at Achior. Marah, who has partly drawn back the curtain of the pavilion, peers out timidly between the draperies.

CURTAIN



ACT III

ACT III

SCENE I. A secluded wood near the Assyrian camp.

Early twilight. Judith is seated on the trunk of a fallen tree arranging wild flowers in her lap. She has discarded the ornaments worn in Act II, a white scarf replacing the pearl necklace; her costume otherwise the same. Marah in the background holding a small wicker pannier containing lilies, ferns, etc. Holofernes stands a pace or two from Judith regarding her.

HOLOFERNES

FAIR women have I known, but never one
Like unto thee. The hour I see thee not
Creeps like a tortoise; but when thou art near,
No swiftest sparrow hath such wings as time.

JUDITH

Of late, my lord, my ear has grown unused
To terms like thine. It has been wont to hear
Accents of grief and pain. Thy phrases seem
As phrases spoken in some half-known tongue.

HOLOFERNES

Then let thy wit translate. In these three days
Have I been lessoned by thy dignity,
Thy wisdom and thy loveliness. The camp
And all the lordly uses of my state
Have lost their savor and significance.
That thou shouldst sit and hold a little flower
Between thy fingers, toying with it thus
And dropping it, of more importance seems
Than some affair of grave diplomacy.

(Sits down beside her)

At dawn I say : " I shall again behold
This daughter of Judea, shall hear her voice,
And catch, mayhap, a softness in her eyes."
Translate thou that, O wise Samaritan !

JUDITH

Some lady of the court at Nineveh
Perchance might find a meaning.

HOLOFERNES

She were else
No woman ! Tell me somewhat of thyself.
Thou art a widow ?

JUDITH

I have told thee that —

And daughter to a man could ransom me.

HOLOFERNES

Not though he were the richest in Judea !

How long wert thou a wife ?

JUDITH

One year, my lord.

HOLOFERNES

And widow ?

JUDITH

Three.

HOLOFERNES

He loved thee well ?

JUDITH

O prince,

I may not speak of this !

HOLOFERNES

In faith, nor I.

There's matter nearer ; what is past is dead. —

Art never merry ? I would hear thy laugh.

Sad thou art not, and yet methinks thy smiles

Are rarer than a miser's charities.
There is a carven image of a sphinx,
A woman and a lion both in one,
That crouching stares across the empty air
With face mysterious, neither sad nor glad.
Thou mind'st me of it, though thy face can change.
Three noons ago thy cheek went white as death
At sight of me. Thou dost not fear me now?

JUDITH

Not now as then, yet I have fear, O prince

HOLOFERNES

Thou shalt unlearn it. Busy tongues of men
Have much misused me in their dull report,
And made my name a terror through the land.
A soldier's falchion sleeps not in the sheath ;
But when these wars are done with I shall hang
My helmet in a garden for the birds
To build a nest in.

JUDITH

Thou art gentler far
Than I had thought thee.

HOLOFERNES

My grim captains here
Would smile behind their beards, could they but
know

What soft ambition seizes me at times
Even in the heat and tumult of debate —
A longing to be other than I am,
To turn my back on all this pomp of war
And dwell unknown, in some untroubled spot,
With wife and children, dreaming life away
Beneath the palms and my Assyrian sky.

JUDITH

This earth, my lord, holds not within its store
Of jewels, crowns, and principalities
A thing more precious than thou dreamest of —
Peace and content, and love, the flower of life.

HOLOFERNES

An idle dream that weakens valor's arm.
Meanwhile that nest of vipers is uncrushed!

(Starts to his feet)

Were I much longer to be held at bay
In these accursed hills, I should become
The savage thing men paint me. But the end
Approaches near — my plans are subtly laid.
Two days from this, unless the very gods
Take arms against us, Bethulia falls.

[He walks up the stage]

JUDITH, *aside*

But two days left — God help me ! Life or death
Lies in the interval !

HOLOFERNES, *turning sharply*

What sayest thou ?

JUDITH, *recovering herself*

That in two days, my lord, it will be shown
Whether or no I am true prophetess.

HOLOFERNES

I shall have kept my covenant, and now
I swear no harm shall touch the oracle,
Though she prove —

Enter Messenger

MESSENGER, *kneeling*

Prince and master, I am sent.

The council waits thy presence, gracious lord.

HOLOFERNES, *impatiently*

Say that I come. I had forgotten them!

'T was I myself convoked the conference.

These wrangling captains give me little rest.

Straightway I come.

[Exit Messenger]

I go on leaden feet.

I leave thee as a reveller leaves his cup,

The wine unfinished. So, now, fare thee well!

[Holofernes goes out]

JUDITH

Amen to that, say I, who fare so ill,

With all this darkness closing in on me.

MARAH, *coming forward*

I would, dear mistress, we might not return

To yonder camp. Rude folk for such as thou,

Those long-haired men that from the Tigris come,

And they that stain their teeth with betel-nut —

Fire-worshippers and bowers-down to stone.

Even the good Bagoas in his pack

Hath a flint image that he mutters to!

JUDITH

And I, in truth, I too would not go back;

But that must be, my mission is not done.
Not long our exile now. Hast left behind
Some love-lorn dark-eyed youth in Bethulfa ?
Here in the summer quiet of this wood
How far we seem from that distracted town
Wrapped in the vapor of its own sick breath !
Conscience reproaches me that I have found
Some transient moments of forgetfulness
Plucking these wild flowers. 'Twas a truce with
fate.

Great peril threatens us. Would thou wert safe !
Cruel was I to drag thee in this coil !

MARAH

What danger threatens that I would not share
With thee, sweet mistress ?

JUDITH

Ah, thou know'st not all.
To-night, when slumber has sealed every ear,
I'll tell thee what dark embassy is mine
And what fell doom upon disaster waits.
Then, if thou waver, still is time to fly
And save thee.

(Rises to her feet, and listens)

Hark ! some foot of man or beast
Has crushed a dry twig in the thicket there !

Bagoas enters hurriedly

BAGOAS

Lady, I bring a message from my lord
Sitting in council with the captains now.
The prince commands that thou shalt feast with
him
This night, and bade me lead thee to his tent.

JUDITH

O Marah, see ! my lord keeps not his word.
He is as those false jewellers who change
A rich stone for a poorer — when none looks.
Five days he promised, and but three are gone,
And now he begs me come to sup with him !

MARAH

No choice hast thou, alas !

JUDITH

One needs must go —
When kings invite. The master's will is mine.
Such gloom has touched me lately, I would fain
Know mirthfulness. I jest, for in my heart

There lurks an unnamed terror. O Bagoas !
He would not slay me in some sudden freak ?

(Bagoas shrugs his shoulders)

Does he wear arms when supping ?

BAGOAS

No, he hangs

His falchion on a peg within the tent ;
Dagger he hath none.

JUDITH, *softly to herself*

God be thanked for that. . . .

Upon a peg within the tent ! *(Reflects)* Bagoas !

BAGOAS

What wouldst thou have, my lady ?

JUDITH

Dost thou serve

The prince to-night ?

BAGOAS

He has so ordered it.

JUDITH

Take it not ill if I persuade my lord
To do without thy service by and by,
Leaving thee free to go what way thou wilt.

'T would please my humor just for once to play
Cup-bearer to the prince, and fetch him drink
In that great chalice thou hast told me of.
And should I find him in a gracious mood,
As often men are between cups of wine,
I'll breathe a word for thee into his ear.

MARAH, *aside*

My mistress plans to be alone with him !

BAGOAS, *with a quick glance at Judith*

No slave had ever such petitioner.
If thou but smile, thou 'lt have no need to speak ;
Thy suit, unspoken, will be granted thee.

MARAH, *aside*

I would that we were gone from here.

JUDITH

But hold !

Perhaps my lord has other guests at hand,
And thou must still remain to wait on them.

BAGOAS

My lord's musicians and his dancing-girls —
He brings such in his train — may come awhile
For thy divertisement. No other guests.

JUDITH

That will content me better.

BAGOAS, *hesitating*

May I speak?

JUDITH

A friend's ear listens to thee; speak.

BAGOAS

This night

Thou standest in great danger. My lord's eyes
Are ravished with thy beauty — fatal gift!
His love is pitiless. (*Pauses*) Should it so turn
That he, before he hath drunk deep of wine,
Should fall into a drowse, then thou wert safe
For that time being.

JUDITH

Does wine make him sleep?

BAGOAS, *significantly*

Some wine might make him.

JUDITH, *eagerly*

What is in thy thought?

BAGOAS

I had an illness once; sleep fled my lids
Till I went mad with wakefulness. A man

Of Koordistan, well skilled in subtle drugs,
Gave me a medicine that cured the ill,
And taught me to compound it.

JUDITH, *quickly*

Hast thou this?

(Bagoas nods his head affirmatively)

Then give it me !

BAGOAS, *handing her a minute metal box, which he holds
between forefinger and thumb*

A dozen grains or so,
Dropt in a drink, will straightway dull the sense
And bring a gentle slumber presently.
'T is not a poison.

JUDITH, *placing the box in her bosom*

Would it were — that I,
At need, might take it. Though it all prove naught,
I am beholden to thee.

*(With an affectionate gesture she gives her hand to Bagoas, who
kisses it respectfully)*

Tell me, now,
How fares it with the Ammonite?

BAGOAS

He has

Such faring as a fox within a trap —
Caught but not killed.

JUDITH

What harder lies in store ?

BAGOAS

I think my lord intends to take him back
To Nineveh.

JUDITH

That were not well for him ?

BAGOAS

Most ill, my lady.

JUDITH

And how bears he this ?

BAGOAS

As one that has looked peril in the face
By field and flood on many a desperate day,
And so disdains it. At the first my lord
Questioned him keenly, being much perplexed
That one same hour should bring ye both to camp.
The prince suspected — I know not just what.

•

JUDITH

And now?

BAGOAS

He doubts not that the Ammonite
And thou are strangers.

JUDITH

He has ventured life
For me, Bagoas! If the chance befell
That thou couldst loose the latchet of his trap,
Wouldst thou not do it?

BAGOAS

For thy sake I would.
But 't will not happen.

JUDITH

Heaven is over all.
Strange things ere now have happened in Judea!

(Pauses)

O I must speak, Bagoas! Stand apart
A moment, Marah. *(Hurriedly)* Come what will, I
speak!

Dark powers, invisible ministers of air,
Led my feet hither, wherefore I knew not

At first, then presently I understood.

Two days from now 't is planned to storm the town
And put those helpless people to the sword.

BAGOAS

Such rumor fills the camp. I think it true.

JUDITH

One thing alone may stay this massacre.

BAGOAS

Whose hand may stay the Prince of Asshur's
hand?

JUDITH

God's!

BAGOAS

What thou speakest is not plain to me.
Thy God's a mystery.

JUDITH

There is that to do
Blanches the cheek and frightens sleep away.
Across my heart in characters of fire
A mortal doom is written. Before dawn
The prince must die!— See how I trust in thee!

BAGOAS

Wouldst have me strike him as he sits at meat?
Command me, I will do it.

JUDITH

Nay, in this

'T is I alone must act, O man of men!
O lion heart! Yet I do beg of thee
A no less heavy service. Should I fail,
Through fault of nerve or some undreamed mishap,
And in the doing find myself undone,
Swear by the love thou bearest her who waits
Thy coming in those far-off lands, O swear
That thou wilt plant thy dagger in my breast
Though thou fall dead beside me.

BAGOAS

In my mind

Such purpose stirred ere thou didst give it words.

JUDITH

Then has God sent thee! I draw breath again.
Let's on; I must make ready for my lord.

*(Motions to Marah and Bagoas to precede her)**(Aside)* He said — upon a peg within the tent!*Dark stage and change of scene*

SCENE II. The tent of Holofernes. A large blue pavilion set diagonally across the left rear corner of the stage. The entrance, which is very wide, hung with embroidered draperies, now drawn back. Within, a lighted cresset depends from the ceiling ; near the doorway, and nearly blocking it, a low couch placed at an angle. At the right and left of the tent, outside, is a small stand upon which slaves are arranging flasks of wine, chalices, and dishes of food, fruit, etc., as the curtain rises. Among the overhanging boughs of trees glimmer lanterns of colored glass-work, and slender tripods supporting cups of burning perfume stretch in a line on either side of the stage. The scene softly illuminated.

Holofernes discovered seated on a long bench or settle, over which is spread a leopard skin. Behind this is his shield, fastened to the shaft of a javelin thrust into the ground. From the boss of the shield glares a green and gold dragon rampant. The slaves retire.

HOLOFERNES

All day have I been haunted by a dream
That in the breathless middle of the night
Robbed sleep of its refreshment. In my thought

I found myself in a damp catacomb
Searching by torchlight for my own carved name
On a sarcophagus ; and as I searched,
A file of wailing shapes drew slowly near —
The hates and passions of my early youth
Become substantial and immortal things
With tongues to blazon forth each hidden crime.
Then terror fell upon me, who have known
Neither remorse nor terror, and I woke.

(Rises dejectedly from the settle)

The dream still frets me, still unstrings my heart.
Is it an omen sent me by the gods?
Such things foretell the doom of fateful men,
Stars, comets, apparitions hint their doom.
The night before my grandsire got his wound
In front of Memphis, and therewith was dead,
He dreamed a lying Ethiop he had slain
Was strangling him ; and, later, my own sire
Saw death in a red writing on a leaf.
And I too. . . .

(Throws himself upon the settle)

Oh, I am ill and troubled in the mind.

That Hebrew woman shall beguile my gloom.
The hour should bring her, if she have not fled.
By what sly necromancy was I won
To give her unwatched freedom in the camp!
Should she not come! — I sigh in saying it,
As though she were a part of all my life,
This woman I have looked on but three days!

Judith enters, attended by Marah and Bagoas. As they
step beyond the wings, Judith turns quickly and lays
her hand on Marah's arm.

JUDITH, *in a low, hurried voice*

No further, thou. Go hide thee in the wood
Hard by, and when I call unto thee come,
And do the thing I bade thee. Fail me not!

MARAH, *lingering, pretends to arrange Judith's robe*

I shall not fail thee, thou adorable!

[*Marah goes out*]

Judith, her manner indicating suppressed agitation, advances to the centre and bends low before Holofernes, who rises quickly, and taking Judith by the hand, leads her to the settle.

HOLOFERNES

The course has wearied thee, so rest thee here,
O Heart's Desire, upon this leopard skin.

From out the jungle by the Ganges' side
The creature leapt on me ; and now I bear
The trophy ever with me in my wars —
A kind of talisman. Meanwhile it makes
A throne whereon a haughty queen might sit.

Judith, in dumb-show, declines the proffered seat, and
begins to remove the mantle which covers her from
head to foot. She throws it over the back of the
settle.

JUDITH

No queen am I, but only thy handmaid.

HOLOFERNES

Ere now a handmaid has become a queen.

JUDITH

To serve thee is to reign. I keep my state,
And am most jealous of my servitude.
This night, O prince, no other slave than I
Shall wait on thee with meat and fruit and wine,
And fetch the scented water for thy hands,
And spread the silvered napkin on thy knee.
So subtle am I, I shall know thy wish
Ere thou canst speak it. Let Bagoas go
This night among his people, save he fear

To lose his place and wage, through some one else
More trained and skilful showing his defect.

HOLOFERNES, *turning to Bagoas*

Thou hearest, O Bagoas, what she says?
Another hath usurped thee. Get thee gone,
Son of the midnight! But stray not from camp,
Lest the lean tiger-whelps should break their fast,
And thou forget I must be waked at dawn.

BAGOAS

I hear, O prince.

HOLOFERNES

And send us presently
The Arab girls and him that plays the lute.

BAGOAS, *aside as he goes out*

Poor lady, in her whiteness how she looks
Like some rare idol that a conqueror
Tears from its niche, in pillaging a town,
And sets among the trappings of his tent.

(Under his breath)

Fear not, O prince. I shall not stray from camp!

While Holofernes divests himself of his breastplate and
hangs his falchion on a peg inside the tent, Judith

goes to one of the tables, and standing with her back to him, but in a position that enables her action to be observed by the audience, fills a flagon with wine, into which she hastily drops the contents of the little metal box given to her by Bagoas.

JUDITH, *aside*

O Thou who lovest Israel, give me strength
And cunning such as never woman had,
That my deceit may be his stripe and scar,
My kiss his swift destruction ! If the drug
Work not its magic on him, then — what then !
Judith returns to the settle, and, kneeling, presents the
cup to Holofernes. Holofernes drinks.

HOLOFERNES

Richer the wine is for those slender hands
And that gold bangle slipping down the wrist.
Now sit by me. (*She obeys*) Cup-bearer, hold the
cup.

What a rare slave thou art !

A helmet heaped with pearls, i' the market-place,
Could buy thee not from me. How shall I make
Thy chains seem lighter ? Our chance-built
camp

Has little entertainment in its stores ;
But I have brought my troop of dancing-girls
From Nineveh, and they shall dance for us,
And one among them, that has voice, shall sing
A love-song that a Persian poet made
Before I slew him for a halting verse.

JUDITH

Surely thou didst not slay a man for that !

HOLOFERNES

Lady, it was a very grievous fault.
Who cheats in weights or measures merits death.
The Medes and Persians have it in their laws.

Enter a troop of Arab girls, with a clash of cymbals.
They prostrate themselves before Judith and Holofernes, and then fall to dancing. Slaves place a small round table near the settle and bring a dish of fruit, a flask of wine, and two flagons. Holofernes and Judith eat and converse in pantomime, he insisting from time to time on her drinking from his cup, which she constantly refills. At the conclusion of the dance the Arab girls again prostrate themselves. While they are retiring, a soft music, chiefly from stringed instruments, is heard, and these verses are sung by a single

voice behind the scenes. Holofernes rests an elbow on one knee, and supporting his chin on his hand, listens stolidly to the song.

O cease, sweet music, let us rest !
Too soon the hateful day is born ;
Henceforth let day be counted night,
And midnight called the morn.

O cease, sweet music, let us rest !
A tearful, languid spirit lies,
Like the dim scent in violets,
In beauty's gentle eyes.

There is a sadness in sweet sound
That quickens tears. O music, lest
We weep with thy soft sorrow, cease !
Be still, and let us rest

JUDITH, *aside*

A strange new look has crept into his face.
He listened to the music as a man
That strains his ear to catch some distant sound
Whose meaning baffles him. — What is 't, my lord ?

HOLOFERNES

Thy coming chased the blackness of my day,
But now the heaviness that clouded me
Has come again.

JUDITH

The music saddened thee.

HOLOFERNES

Not so. I am not fashioned like a harp
That some chance touch may sadden or make glad.

(Rises from the settle)

That pungent scent of burning sandal-wood,

(Puts his hand vaguely to his forehead)

Or the dull opiate of those wilted flowers,
Or some malignant influence of the night
Hath drowsed me. Let me rest upon the couch
A moment ; it will pass.

They enter the tent together.

JUDITH

Lie there, my prince,

I will keep watch and ward.

Holofernes reclines upon the couch, propping himself
on one elbow. He points to a low tabouret at the
side of the couch.

HOLOFERNES

And sit thou here,

Thou of the dove's eyes and the proud swan's throat.

Thy tresses give out odors of the rose.

Thy breath upon my cheek is as the air

Blown from a far-off grove of cinnamon.

Fairer art thou than is the night's one star —

(Smiling) Thou makest me a poet with thine eyes !

He puts one arm around her neck and gently draws her head to his breast. Judith rests there motionless for a moment, then slowly disengages herself and rises to her feet with a dazed, troubled look. In a second or two she recovers herself, and stooping picks up the flagon, which has fallen to the floor of the tent.

JUDITH

Sweet prince, I have forgot mine office. See,
The flagon's empty ! I'll go fetch thee wine.

She hurries out, and sets the cup on a table, resting one hand on the edge of it, the other hand pressed against her heart.

Oh, save me, Lord, from that dark cruel prince,
And from mine own self save me ! for this man,
A worshipper of senseless carven gods,
Slayer of babes upon the mother-breast,
He, even he, hath by some conjurer's trick,
Or by his heathen beauty, in me stirred

Such pity as unnerves the lifted hand.

Oh, let not my hand fail me, in Thy name !

(She returns to the tent with wine)

Drink this, my lord.

HOLOFERNES

In the full compass of my thirty years

At no one time have I so drunk of wine.

Holofernes, who has fallen back on the cushions, raises himself with effort on his elbow. He passes his arm around Judith's waist and constrains her to sit down on the edge of the couch. Then takes the cup and drinks.

Sweet vision, 't is a medicine that cures,

Grief will it cure and every ill, save love.

Who first did think to press it from the grape ?

Art going? Nay, I know thou hast not stirred.

(Confusedly)

I am the plaything of vain fantasies.

Voices are calling through a mist. I hear

The clang of shields somewhere far-off, and see

The shapes of men and horses marching by—

O shadows, dreams, and visions, let me be !

Holofernes sinks back on the cushions, his arm slips from his breast, and the flagon, which he has retained in his grasp, clashes on the floor. Judith rises, startled, and looks at him with curious intentness for a few seconds.

JUDITH

My lord? . . . He sleeps! . . . Unending be his dream!

She advances a step outside the tent, grasping the folds of the looped curtain in one hand, then turns and gazes upon Holofernes.

The ignoble slumber that has fettered him
Robs not his pallid brow of majesty
Nor from the curved lip takes away the scorn.

(Lets the curtain fall across the entrance to the tent)

Bagoas shall not awaken him at dawn!

(Pauses)

O broken sword of proof! O prince betrayed!
In me he trusted, he who trusted none!

(Pauses again)

I did not longer dare to look on him,
Lest I should lose my reason through my eyes.
This man — this man, had he been of my race,
And I a maiden, and we two had met —

What visions mock me ! Some ancestral sin
Hath left a taint of madness in my brain.
Were I not I, I would unbind my hair
And let the tresses cool his fevered cheek,
And take him in my arms — Oh, am I mad ?
Yonder the watch-fires flare upon the walls,
Like red hands pleading to me through the dark ;
There famished women weep, and have no hope.
The moan of children moaning in the streets
Tears at my heart. O God ! have I a heart ?
Why do I falter ! (*Kneeling*) Thou that rulest all,
Hold not Thy favor from me that I seek
This night to be Thy instrument ! Dear Lord,
Look down on me, a widow of Judea,
A feeble thing unless Thou sendest strength !
A woman such as I slew Sisera.
The hand that pierced his temples with a nail
Was soft and gentle, like to mine, a hand
Moulded to press a babe against her breast !
Thou didst sustain her. Oh, sustain Thou me,
That I may free Thy chosen from their chains ! —
Each sinew in my body turns to steel,

My pulses quicken, I no longer fear !
My prayer has reached Him, sitting there on high !
The hour is come I dreamed of ! This for thee,
O Israel, my people, this for thee !

Soft orchestral music. Judith rushes wildly into the tent, closing the hangings behind her. The boom of a gong is heard and a sentinel near by cries : "Midnight ! Midnight ! All is well !" A second sentinel, further off, takes up the cry, which is repeated by a third in the remote distance. Marah and Bagoas, with anxious faces, are observed at the right-hand middle entrance. Marah crosses the stage, picks up Judith's mantle, and takes a position near Bagoas. A sound like that of a falling body, accompanied by a muffled exclamation from Judith, is heard inside the tent. Enter Assyrian Captain, who halts abruptly, and listens.

ASSYRIAN CAPTAIN

What noise was that within ?

(To Bagoas)

Art stricken dumb ?

Some ill, perhaps, hath happened to the Prince.

Art turned to stone ? Go to thy master, slave !

Myself will go.

[Advances towards the tent

BAGOAS, *intercepting him*

Not thou, ill-fated man!

(Seizes the captain by the shoulder and stabs him)

An evil star it was that led thee here!

ASSYRIAN CAPTAIN, *clutching at the air as he falls*

What dog is this has bitten me to death?

(Faintly) O thou vile slave, had I suspected thee. . .

[Dies]

Judith violently thrusts the draperies aside and appears grasping an unsheathed falchion, which she flings from her.

JUDITH *to Marah*

'Tis done! Do thou!

Marah goes into the tent and immediately emerges, bearing the head of Holofernes enveloped in the mantle. Judith, who has stood motionless with both hands pressed against her eyes as if to shut out some appalling spectacle, turns and discovers Bagoas on the extreme left crouching over the body of the captain. She starts back at the sight.

BAGOAS

Quick, let the black night swallow thee! Begone!

Marah seizes Judith by the wrist. The two are seen in the act of taking flight as the curtain descends.

QUICK CURTAIN

ACT IV

ACT IV

(Four days later)

The market-place in Bethulia. Far back on the right, the entrance to the great synagogue ; the long flight of gradually ascending steps leading to the portals crowded with spectators. Garlands and cloths of gold and purple tissues hang from the windows of the houses facing on three sides of the quadrangle. In the centre of the square, a platform two or three feet in height supports a large antique chair richly draped. With the exception of the space surrounding the dais, the stage is slowly filled up by people of every condition.

Enter Nathan and Joachim conversing excitedly.

NATHAN

WAS it not wonderful ! O day of days !

The Ammonite, held captive, saw it all.

It thrills the blood to hear him tell of it.

When they discovered Holofernes slain

And lying headless 'mid the tapestries,

A sudden silence fell upon the camp,

And all the people stood like blocks of stone

In some deserted quarry ; then a voice
Blown through a trumpet clamored : *He is dead !*
The Prince is dead ! The Hebrew witch hath slain
Prince Holofernes ! Fly, Assyrians, fly !
On this a panic seized the Asshur hosts ;
They broke and fled from that strong mountain-
hold,
Leaving their arms, their chariots, and their tents,
Even the camels tethered at the stake !
Our children's children shall be told this tale.

JOACHIM

Three days and nights at point of our red spears
The cohorts scattered. Such as know not death
Are safe now in Damascus, or beyond.

NATHAN

'Twas Achior led the horsemen. It is said
A man he made a friend of in the camp
Set Achior free.

JOACHIM

That in effect is true —
A captive Holofernes held in thrall

As slave. That gaunt and swarthy-visaged man
Who follows Achior everywhere is he.

NATHAN, *meditatively*

To think a woman did it ! Day of days !
Yet is not Judith made of tenderness ?
I saw her stoop once in the crowded street
To kiss a sickly child the mother held.

JOACHIM

A warrior's soul, a woman's heart ! I hear
That she has begged the Patriarchs to remove
The head of Holofernes from the lance
On which 't is set above the Eastern Gate.

NATHAN, *still meditative*

Such pity meetly crowns the daring act.
I wonder, now, the peril being past
And all her pulses stilled, if in her thought
There is not some vague, nameless sense of dread
Of her own self that could do such a deed !

JOACHIM

O Nathan, son of Paul, thou ever wert
A splitter of fine hairs ! Had she not slain
That monster in his hour of victory,

Making his pride to bite the very dust,
What had become of *thee*, and all of us !

NATHAN

True ! — through God's grace and that one woman's
hand

The tombs and temples of Judea were saved.
I would not look good fortune in the teeth,
But somehow the event breeds thoughts in me.

JOACHIM

It were more wholesome to have fewer, man !
I trust thou hast not spoken much of this.

NATHAN

Do I look like a fool ?

JOACHIM

No, no, good friend —
That's what astonishes ! But say no more.
This hour comes Judith to the market-place,
Where a glad people fain would honor her
With pipe and timbrel and the heart's acclaim.
See what a mighty throng has gathered here !

[Nathan and Joachim stand aside

Enter Bagoas and Achior.

BAGOAS

O Captain, be not prodigal of thanks.

'T was that brave lady bade me break thy chain.

ACHIOR

Alas, Bagoas, that did not set me free !

I am a prisoner whose manacles

Are newly riveted. 'T is mine to have

A most sweet cruel jailer who forbids

My presence. Only by a chance like this

May I behold her.

[A flourish of trumpets, then distant music

BAGOAS

There my lady comes ! —

My fate and thine are one, brave Ammonite.

Though I go back to Koordistán enriched

With all the gold and trappings that were found

In Holofernes' tent — her gift to me —

I still go back a captive, ever bound

In bands of love and reverence for her.

Daring and meek and merciful is she,

And pure as is the white eternal snow

That lies unreach'd upon the mountain top.

ACHIOR

Thou didst watch over her that dreadful night.
I envy thee the office that was thine,
To stand there in the dark, with dagger drawn,
To save her or avenge, had all gone ill.

BAGOAS

And thou — for her sake didst thou not dare death ?

The music approaches. The multitude sways to and fro, and voices cry: "She is coming!" "She who saved us is coming!" Achior and Bagoas join Nathan and Joachim at the wings near the footlights. The crowd parts right and left to give way to Ozias, Chabris, and Charmis, accompanied by chief captains, civic dignitaries, and men-at-arms bearing banners. Enter a troop of maidens dancing, followed by Judith dressed in her widow's weeds as in Act I. She is very pale, and walks with bowed head, Marah a few steps in the rear. The music dies down to a low murmur.

NATHAN

I thought she would come clad in cloth of gold,
Not in the sombre livery of grief.

JOACHIM

Like some victorious chief returned from war,
She lays aside her armor.

The Patriarchs conduct Judith to the foot of the dais, and motion her to ascend. She seems to demur. The Patriarchs, apparently embarrassed, expostulate in dumb-show, pointing appealingly to the empty chair.

NATHAN

See! she halts

Before the throne ; they urge her to ascend,
And she, as one unworthy, still protests.
She takes her triumph modestly, methinks.

JOACHIM

Nigh unto Dothaim is a sepulchre
Where all her pride lies buried.

ACHIOR, *sadly*

And her love !

One of the chief captains reaches forward and places a light chaplet of laurel upon Judith's brow. Tumultuous cries and cheers.

JUDITH, *in a low voice*

Oh, who am I to sit upon a throne?
It were more fitting I should bow me down
At the throne's foot, my forehead in the dust.
Ozias, I have drunk a bitter cup !
Deck me with rue and fennel, if thou wilt.

OZIAS *to Judith*

Nay, gentle Judith, they will take it ill
That came from far and near to honor thee.
Thy name is in their hearts and in their prayers,
And they would look upon thy face this day.

JUDITH

So be it, then — it was for love of them !
My city, Bethulia, 't was for thee !

NATHAN

See ! she consents.

ACHIOR, *rapturously*

Her face is like a star !

Judith slowly mounts the dais and stands erect, with
one hand resting on the arm of the chair. There
is a beatific expression on her features as she faces
the populace. Those immediately about the platform
kneel.

Mark how the warm blood steals into her cheek !
Such tint it brings as in the season's prime
Creeps up the slender stem to dye the rose.

NATHAN, *smiling*

A singer of love canticles was spoiled
When Achior turned soldier.

JOACHIM

Peace, man, peace !

I wonder will she speak. She lifts her hand
As if to beg the silence of the crowd.

JUDITH

Oh, not to me, but unto the Most High
Lift up thy voices ! Glorify His name
With pipe and harp and solemn chanted psalm !
Let the triumphant breath of trumpets blow
The news to the four winds, Judea is saved !
For once again hath God delivered us.
He was the hand, and I was but the sword,
The sword was I, and He the hand that smote.
Glory and praise to Him forevermore !

(Pauses)

The spell is broken. Now farewell to all,
To votive wreath and music's blandishment.

(Takes off the chaplet and holds it in her hand)

From this day forth I dwell apart, alone
In mine own house, where laughter may not come
Nor any light, vain voices of the world.
Only the sorrowful shall find the door
Unbarred and open.

(Descends the first step of the dais, and lingers)

In thy memory

Keep me as some belovèd wife or child

Or sister that died long and long ago !

Cries of "Judith!" "Judith!" "Judith!" Children scatter flowers and palm-sprays at her feet. A sudden blare of trumpets, followed by soft orchestral music. Judith descends from the dais. The crowd falls back in silence. Achior impulsively advances a pace or two towards her, and then halts, irresolute.

ACHIOR, *with an imploring gesture*

Judith !

JUDITH, *hurriedly wrapping herself in the black veil, one end of which she throws over the lower part of her face*

Let no one born of woman follow me !

[Swift exit]

Bagoas grasps Achior by the arm, restraining him. The crowd leans forward with outstretched hands, and stands spellbound gazing after Judith. Tableau.

SLOW CURTAIN

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